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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DAMASCUS 000491

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA  
PARIS FOR JORDAN  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: TIME FOR TALKING POINTS TO COUNTER SYRIA'S "CHARM OFFENSIVE"

REF: A. DAMASCUS 427  
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 471  
[1](#)C. PARIS 1261

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, 1.4 b,d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Eager to exploit growing European interest in engaging Syria, Damascus is taking credit for recent "stabilizing" regional developments, such as the Doha accord on Lebanon, peace talks with Israel, the Hamas-Israeli "calming," and even Israeli-Hizballah prisoner exchanges. Some UN and European diplomats now suggest Syria's indirect talks with Israel and support for the Doha accord represent concrete action by the SARG deserving a "response" from the international community. After FM Muallim's July 4 trip to France and as President Asad prepares to travel to Paris, we need to develop counter-points for use with the international community to convey that the Syrians are trying to convert a change in atmospherics into a mirage of concrete positive actions. For example, despite its rosy rhetoric, the SARG condoned and likely facilitated the extremely negative May 24-25 visit of Hamas political chief Khaled Meshal to Tehran.

Further, while the SARG allowed an IAEA team to conduct a strictly limited June 22-25 visit, Syria's WMD record, including its undeclared CW stocks, refusal to sign the CWC, and whatever we can release publicly about SCUD missile modifications, should not be conveniently swept under the carpet by the Syrians. As usual, the SARG is seeking to get something for nothing. While we cannot easily turn off the European push to engage, we should publicly and privately make clear what the SARG has and has not done, and challenge the illusion of action the SARG seeks to present. End Summary

[1](#)2. (C) Two months since Bashar Asad announced the opening of indirect talks with Israel to the Syrian Baath Party Central Committee and six weeks after the Doha agreement that led to the election of a Lebanese President, Syrian officials have overcome the government's perennial PR incompetence and begun to exploit these developments with foreign audiences. Syrian officials are claiming profound policy changes and taking credit for supporting positive trends in the region and are finding receptive audiences in many quarters.

[1](#)3. (C) Syrian FM Muallim reiterated to French officials in

Paris July 4 that the SARG desires a peace agreement with Israel, is seeking constructive bilateral relations with Lebanon, and is looking for an alternative to its strategic relationship with Iran. Muallim's visit met with huge press pools that soaked up and reported every word. In the build-up to Asad's July 12-14 trip to Paris, the Syrian President told Le Figaro in an interview published July 7 that the trip to Paris "opens a large door to the international community." He characterized indirect talks with Israel as "testing their intentions" in search of a common basis and called for international support for the talks. In one telling comment, Bashar said Syria was waiting for a new U.S. administration and that "the role of the United States is essential, but that of Europe is complementary, and when we talk of the political role of Europe, France is in the avant-garde."

¶4. (C) Syrian officials are even going as far as to suggest that indirect negotiations with Israel and Syria's "new" policy toward Lebanon have contributed to Israel's tahdiyya (calming) with Hamas in Gaza and the exchange of prisoners between Hizballah and Israel. We see little evidence that Syria actually contributed to these negotiations, but the SARG is nonetheless suggesting that these "breakthroughs" are improving regional stability.

¶5. (C) Encouraged by this rhetoric, a number of our local diplomatic counterparts have argued that Syria's new stance reflects concrete actions to which the international community "should respond." We have forcefully argued that rosy assessments of Syrian intentions lack any concrete

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basis, and that thus far, Syria's claims of a new policy orientation come in the absence of any tangible actions on either the areas the SARG claims or on the key issues of human rights or Iraq.

¶6. (C) Nonetheless, German, Italian, Spanish, Norwegian, French, UN, and other European contacts suggest a new urgency to the ever-present interest in their capitals to pursue engagement. This information will particularly useful for newcomers to the Syrian spider web. We note Icelandic FM Gisladottir's June 25 visit to Damascus as part of a Middle East tour to prepare for Iceland's 2009-2010 UNSC membership. Post suggests Washington develop clear talking points for capitals (particularly for neophytes such as Iceland) on the facts of Syrian behavior.

¶7. (C) Suggested themes follow. Post suggests an IC scrub for each subject -- particularly regarding Syria's WMD and missile programs and its relations with Iran and Hizballah -- to see whether more specific information might be released to strengthen our arguments.

#### (C) SARG RHETORIC MUST BE MATCHED BY CONCRETE ACTIONS

-- (C) The SARG has a history of suggesting it will take actions in the hope of winning foreign policy concessions in exchange for little action on its part. As the SARG presents a new public relations face and seeks to expand dialogue, we see little evidence that it has actually backed up this rhetoric with concrete steps. In fact the SARG has so far done little. In some cases, it continues to adopt negative policies that must be factored into any dialogue.

-- (C) PALESTINIAN ISSUES: The SARG states it supports Palestinian-Israeli peace talks and reconciliation among Palestinian factions. Rather than taking any concrete actions in support of the Palestinian-Israeli track, Syria continues to allow HAMAS and other Palestinian rejectionist groups to take steps to undermine the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority and derail the PA-Israeli peace talks. The SARG, which we know can control the activities and travel of Palestinian groups residing in Syria, not only allowed but encouraged Hamas leader Khalid Meshal to travel to Iran May

24-25, where he made public statements critical of Israel and the Palestinian Authority and thanked Iran for its support of the Palestinian armed resistance. The SARG hosted PA President Mahmoud Abbas in Damascus July 6-8 and pressured the Palestinian leader to meet with Meshal despite Abbas' insistence on avoiding such a meeting until Hamas returned control of Gaza to the PA and agreed to accept previous Palestinian peace agreements with Israel. Subsequently, the SARG remained silent while Hamas officials harshly criticized Abbas for not meeting Meshal and accused him of doing so at the behest of Israel and the U.S.

-- (C) GOLAN TRACK: The SARG states that its participation in indirect talks with Israel is a sign of a new willingness to move forward on the Syria-Israel track. The talks are naturally secret and we welcome efforts that lead to regional comprehensive peace. But we see little evidence in Syria's public statements that it is going beyond a restatement of its positions in previously unsuccessful negotiations, most recently in 2000. For example, Syria has simply re-articulated its demand for the return of the Golan to its June 4, 1967 borders. Syria also has recycled unproved accusations that Israel is dumping nuclear waste in the Golan. Future direct talks with Israel may be one indicator the Syrians are serious, but even these direct talks might not mean the Syrians are willing to make concessions.

-- (C) SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS: The SARG has hinted broadly that it is seeking alternatives to its strategic relationship with Iran. While tensions between Damascus and Tehran have surfaced over Iraq, the assassination of Hizballah leader Imad Mugniyeh in Damascus, and Syria's indirect negotiations

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with Israel, there has been no public change in relations between the two countries. In fact the record shows that the SARG recently sent the Syrian Minister of Defense to sign a defense cooperation MOU with Tehran on May 27. Syria and Iran continue to coordinate strategic positions through regular high-level contacts. Both governments support deepening of economic, cultural, and trade ties with Iran, as evinced by the recent telecommunications MOU on July 2 and planned mid-July meetings of the Syrian-Iranian Supreme Commission.

-- (C) SYRIAN INTERFERENCE IN LEBANON: President Asad's proclaimed support for the Doha accord and his statements that he wants to open an embassy in Beirut are welcome, but thus far Syria has taken no concrete steps toward more normal relations.

- Syria continues to transfer arms to Hizballah and has done nothing to show it has abandoned its reliance on Hizballah to protect its equities in Lebanon. SARG-Hizballah contacts continue at all levels.

- Border demarcation: Syrian claims it wants to establish normal diplomatic relations but thus far refuses to discuss border demarcation of Shebaa farms, which prevents progress on this issue and upholds Hizballah's destabilizing position in Lebanon.

- Ongoing violence in Lebanon: While Syria's role in continued violence in Lebanon is unknown, Syria maintains close relations with Alawi groups that are well armed and engaged in violent conflict with Sunnis in northern Lebanon.

- Lebanon's Syrian Socialist National Party, which maintains close ties to Damascus, actively assisted Hizballah's armed assault on Beirut in early May. In addition, Syria's open support of Palestinian groups in the Lebanese Bekaa, such as the PLFP-GC, undermines GOL control of its own territory.

- The SARG has suggested that diplomatic relations with Lebanon will come at a cost to the long-established and

mutually supportive Joint Syrian-Lebanese Economic Social Council, which has provided mutual economic benefits that are important to Lebanon. The SARG's public statements that restoration of normal diplomatic relations will mean summarily canceling these agreements are more threatening than constructive.

- Doha Follow Up: Six weeks after Doha, Lebanon still lacks a government. Syrian claims that it can do nothing to help facilitate the process of government formation in Lebanon call into question the credit Syria seeks to take the Doha accord.

-- (C) SYRIA'S ROLE IN THE ARAB WORLD: Syria claims that the March 29-30 Arab League summit confirmed Syria's moderate role and gave it a mandate to address Arab issues, but we see little evidence that Syria is contributing to resolving disputes and promoting cooperation within the Arab world.

- Major Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt continue to wait for Bashar to take concrete steps toward a more constructive approach to Lebanon and away from the destructive approach Syria has taken to Lebanon and its rejection of moderate Arab appeals the address the situation in Lebanon.

- Countries such as Jordan are willing to engage Syria, such as Jordanian King Abdullah's recent publicized July 1 phone call but they are seeing little gains in return for their efforts to reach out to Syria.

-- (C) WMD ISSUES: While Syria proclaims its desire to cooperate with the IAEA in investigating serious evidence of

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a covert nuclear program and allowed an extremely restricted June 22-25 IAEA visit to investigate a covert nuclear program, Syria has never accounted for its CW stocks, refuses to join the Chemical Weapons Convention, and is modernizing its long-range missile systems in cooperation with Russia, North Korea, and other countries. There remain suspicions Syria could be sharing missile technology with Hizballah. (Note: Just as Washington has done in past demarches regarding Syrian WMD and missile programs, Post believes a new scrub of releasable intelligence would strengthen our arguments regarding the gap between Syrian rhetoric and actions.)

-- (C) SECURITY COOPERATION WITH IRAQ: Despite Syria's rhetorical claims it desires normal relations with a secure and stable Iraq, Syria has done little to advance security cooperation with Baghdad. Syrians continue to host former Saddam Hussein military officials and Iraqi Baath Party figures who raise money for weapons and subversion in Iraq. Despite some high-level, Iraqi-Syrian high-level engagement and unilateral deployments along its border, the SARG continues to refuse to take concrete security actions to improve security cooperation with the Government of Iraq.

-- (C) ECONOMIC REFORMS/CORRUPTION: President Asad and other Syrian officials claim Syria has made strides in opening its economy to global trade and fighting corruption. Yet despite the Syrian Parliament's vote to ratify the UN Convention on Anti-Corruption, Transparency International ranked Syria 138th of 179 countries in corruption (putting it among the worst ranked in the Middle East.)

-- (C) FIGHTING EXTREMISM: The SARG claims it is actively combatting extremism and terrorism, and it may be taking some actions to reduce domestic threats to the Asad regime. However, SARG cooperation with international bodies engaged in the war on global terrorism is limited.

(C) ISSUES THE SARG IS NOT ADDRESSING

-- (C) HUMAN RIGHTS: When various foreign officials have raised Syria's human rights problems (such as prisoners of conscience), the SARG rejects any discussion of this subject, arguing it is purely an internal matter. Leading Syrian intellectuals and democratic reformers continue to be held in prison, and the SARG is preparing criminal prosecution of those involved with establishing the non-violent Damascus Declaration National Council in December 2007. The Syrian security services have orchestrated a country-wide crackdown on all forms of political expression and activities that do not conform to government dictates.

-- (C) FOREIGN FIGHTERS: The SARG claims it has strengthened border security and is taking steps to scrutinize foreign visitors to control the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. In fact, foreign fighters traversing Syrian territory continue to kill and maim Iraqi civilians, security forces, and coalition members. While the numbers of foreign fighters and suicide attacks have decreased, their impact continues to represent a security threat to Iraqi civilians and a government attempting to establish law and order. If Syria were truly serious about reorienting its policy, it would take more effective action against networks facilitating the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq.

#### (C) CONCLUSION

-- (C) As SARG officials reach out to the international community and present an image of progress, we urge that all involved parties respond to the SARG on the basis of its record, not on its rhetoric.  
CORBIN